



A general view shows part of the Vinpearl leisure complex on Phu Quoc island as the island prepares for its first international tourists to arrive after a COVID-19 vaccine passport scheme kicked off this month in Vietnam. — AFP photos



A general view shows part of the Vinpearl leisure complex on Phu Quoc island.



An employee (center) paints conical hats inside the Vinpearl leisure complex on Phu Quoc Island.

Corals and cable cars: Vietnam tourist island reopens with big dreams

Tour guide Lai Chi Phuc has been counting down the days until travellers return to the white-sand beaches and thick tropical jungle of Vietnam's Phu Quoc, a once-poor fishing island pushing to be Asia's next holiday hotspot as pandemic restrictions ease. Yesterday, around 200 South Koreans touched down on the island, which lies a few kilometers off Cambodia in the azure waters of the Gulf of Thailand, after a vaccine passport scheme kicked off this month in Vietnam.

Among the arrivals was Tae Hyeong Lee, who was returning to the island for a third time and keen to make a beeline for the beach. "It's wonderful to be here. This is my first time travelling out of South Korea since the pandemic started," he told AFP. But others may skip the lazy beach break in favor of action and entertainment as they shuffle between a 12,000-room hotel complex, an amusement park, 18-hole golf course, casino, safari park and miniature Venice. The \$2.8-billion leisure resort, part of the "sleepless city" model, opened six months ago as COVID-19 ravaged tourism across the world-and as other Asian countries reliant on the industry, like Thailand, were rethinking their mass tourism frameworks.

For 33-year-old Phuc, who remembers a poverty-stricken childhood where "everyone wanted to escape Phu Quoc", the island's growing popularity gave him a way to return home after years of scratching out a living as a salesman in the nearby cities of the Mekong Delta. "But it's a pity also," he told AFP, lamenting the loss of the island's palm-fringed beaches to resorts.

Flood of plastic

Ahead of Saturday's reopening, staff at Vinpearl resort-where the arrivals are staying-swept beaches, arranged cutlery on tables and laid out sunbeds. Others busied themselves painting delicate flowers on conical hats. "When we heard visitors were coming back, I was just so excited," said duty manager Ngo Thi Bich Thuong. Before the pandemic in 2019, around five million people, including half a million foreigners-most-



A couple poses for wedding photos in the compound of the Vinpearl leisure complex on Phu Quoc Island.

ly from China, South Korea, Japan and Russia-holidayed on Phu Quoc. Vingroup-the enormously powerful conglomerate behind the new complex-is pushing to make the island: "a new international destination on the world tourist map".

To cater for the tourist boom, 40,000 hotel rooms have been built, planned or are under construction, vice chairman of the Vietnam Tourism Advisory Board Ken Atkinson told AFP-"that's more hotel keys than they have in Sydney, Australia". Globally popular vacation spots such as Thailand's Phuket have given Vietnam something to aim for. Atkinson took a group of senior Vietnamese government officials there in 2005 — but while Phuket's vibrant international tourist scene took years to build up: "Vietnam has a tendency of wanting to do everything all at once", he noted. "Unfortunately I don't think there was enough attention given to what would be in the long-term benefit of the island," he added.

Phu Quoc is a UNESCO biosphere reserve-surrounding waters are stuffed with coral reefs and its beaches were once nesting spots for Hawksbill and Green turtles. But no nesting has taken

place in recent years, the UN body said in their last assessment in 2018.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has warned of "an almost unimaginable flood of plastic" that chokes rivers, canals and sea life. Around 160 tons of trash-almost enough to fill 16 trucks-is generated every day,



Women pose for photos at the Vinpearl leisure complex on Phu Quoc Island.

according to WWF, which says the island's waste management is not fit to cope with the tourism explosion. "More and more tourists are very conscious of the environment. They don't want to be going to places where beaches are littered or where effluent is going into the sea," Atkinson warned.

Pockets of paradise

But alongside the trash, and the garish headline attractions-including the world's longest non-stop three-rope cable car and Vietnam's first teddy bear museum-there are still pockets of paradise. Chu Dinh Duc, 26, from mainland Vietnam, first saw Phu Quoc from the back of a motorbike in 2017. Speeding through dense forests and winding his way to the few remaining sleepy villages where fishermen cast their nets into the ocean as the sun came up, he fell in love.

Two years later, he opened a simple homestay business catering to foreigners. "My goal here is not to take a lot of their money," he said. "But I want as many as possible to come." "If Phu Quoc remained undeveloped, it would just be a pearl undiscovered." — AFP



A staff member walks past a swimming pool inside the Vinpearl resort on Phu Quoc Island.

Back on all fours with titanium paws for Russia rescue dog

Monika the Russian rescue dog is ready for her new life after she was fitted with four prosthetic titanium paws in a pricey and complex operation paid for by a crowd-funding campaign. Two weeks after the procedure, the small beige pooch is still weak and tired, but she's back on her feet again. "Luck and

experience played its part," said Sergei Gorshkov, the vet who completed the challenging op. The 33-year-old from the Siberian city of Novosibirsk has fitted artificial limbs on more than 30 furry patients, including a quadruple transplant on a cat. But this was the first time he had tried the operation on a dog.

Monika had travelled far for this life-changing surgery. She was found by volunteers in a forest near Krasnodar, a city in southern Russia 4,000 kilometers (2,485 miles) from Gorshkov's clinic. Her four legs were bloody stumps. "Nobody really knows what happened to her. Some volunteers think that somebody cut her paws off out of cruelty," Gorshkov told AFP. Monika-estimated to be between two and four years old-could have suffered the fate of thousands of stray dogs that are found injured: put down or just left to die.

Luckily, she ended up in the caring hands of Alla Leonkina, a volunteer from Krasnodar. Leonkina said that for almost a year she and a friend took care of Monika, who was in a "terrible state".

While looking after Monika, she heard about Gorshkov's clinic and launched an online campaign to fund the surgery. Within a month, they had 400,000 rubles (\$5,400, 4,800 euros) — a large sum for Russia. Leonkina said that Monika flew to Siberia sitting next to her on the plane. The campaign also financed the prosthetic titanium legs that were made using a 3D printer. Gorshkov said that Monika's bones will grow and adapt to the artificial limbs "like antlers on a deer". And once she's recovered, Monika will be able to walk into her new home. — AFP

Kim Kardashian and Leeds aid Afghan female footballers' flight to Britain

Members of the Afghanistan women's youth development football team have been airlifted to the UK in an evacuation flight funded by US celebrity Kim Kardashian. The 35 female footballers and their families, a total of 130 people, arrived at Stansted Airport, east of London, in the early hours of Thursday morning, according to the ROKIT Foundation. The squad had been in Pakistan on temporary 30-day visas since escaping from Afghanistan following a takeover of the country by the Taliban but risked being sent back when their asylum period expired if no other country was prepared to take them in.

But a charter flight brought them to the UK, where they will spend 10 days of a coronavirus quarantine in a hotel before starting their new lives. A representative for Kardashian, best known as a star of reality television, told Britain's PA news agency the flight was funded by her and her SKIMS brand. Siu-Anne Gill, chief executive officer of the ROKIT Foundation which helped organize the footballers' escape from Afghanistan, said she was "extremely humbled by the courage shown by these girls".

"That's inspired us to ensure that their efforts in getting over the border don't go to waste," she added. Since their return to power on August 15, the Taliban have said that women can play

football but only under strict conditions-namely barred from playing in public.

Other Afghan female players have fled to Portugal

Leeds United are among the organizations offering to help the footballers who have arrived in England, with Andrea Radrizzani, the owner of the Premier League football club, saying in a statement: "We are delighted the Afghan Women & Girls Development Football



Kim Kardashian

Team and their families, led by their brave, former captain Khalida Popal have landed safely in the UK, following extensive efforts by a number of partners. "We are honored to have played our part and grateful that the UK government has enabled their resettlement in the UK." He added: "This demonstrates the power of football and sport in general, as a force for good and shows how the football community is able to collaborate and mobilize to save lives.

"Through Play for Change Charitable Trust and Leeds United we stand ready to support the girls and their families in building an inclusive and prosperous future. We can't wait to see them playing football again." —AFP



These pictures show Monika, an amputee dog with four artificial limbs, at a veterinary clinic in Novosibirsk. — AFP photos